Chapter Ten

AT THE ALTAR OF ANTHROPOPHAGY: EXHUMING THE ENSANGUINED EPHEMERA OF THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE

> “Return to Texas
> The grill is on
> Meathook sharpened
> And so is the saw … “
>
> —Necrophagia
> “Return to Texas” (2005)

Creepy Reader, the year was 1974. It was the year of my birth amidst the nuclear wastelands of Grue Jersey; it was also the very same year that a little film was shat out of the befouled, worm-ridden bowels of the collective American unconscious, a grueling exercise in sinematic terrorism that would not so much change the face of celluloid horror as peel its wrinkled flesh from the grinning skull beneath. This film—no, this *experience*, for that is what it *truly* is for those who worship at its eternally offal-adorned altar—that spilled out in a steaming sanguinolent surge from the slit throat of the rotting ruins of the American Dream was *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Even though I have seen *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* more times than I can count since its horrors were first burned into the retina of my mind's eye 13 years after both it and yours cruelly were loosed into existence, Tobe Hooper's grisly buzzsaw opus, an excruciating homage to the gruesome regimen of man-eating, remains for me and coffinfuls of other like-minded fiends one of the utter epitomes of modern American horror.

Along with the likes of George Romero's zombified masterpiece *Night of the Living Dead* and Roger "Victor Janos" Watkins's Grand Guignol snuffie *Last House on Dead End Street*, *Chainsaw*—first called *Headcheese* and then *Leatherface*—ushered in this unrelenting epoch where visceral carnage was king. Gone was the horror of the days of yore, a safe sort of escapism found in the arms of the Wolfman or the Mummy where the horrors retreated back under the bed with the rolling of the credits and the comforting restoration of the status quo.

Chainsaw was cut from a far more tarnished and transgressive cloth. For this species of sinematic horror-beast left your world, like its victims, debauched, defiled, and desecrated—a quivering, gutted carcass stewing in its own piss. The savage misanthropy and ferocious nihilism of the Texas sun-scorched atrocity that is Hooper and company's *Chainsaw* was born out of the disillusioned idealism of the 1960s, the rape and ruin of its peace and love rhetoric.

The film's inverted fairy-tale nature represented its makers' bitter skepticism of the utopic safety promised by the American Dream; mirroring the horrors of the real world upon which they had been forced to feed since birth, *Chainsaw* stood as a seething "Fuck you!" in the face of this bankrupt illusion. To say it like it is, Creepy Reader, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* drove a howling, oil-spitting chainsaw up the ass of Americana. It not only served to define the gloriously depraved age of 1970s drive-in horror but to also set a standard for modern genre films that has rarely, if ever, been reached, let alone *challenged*.

With its pseudo-documentary feel and surreally nightmarish spirit, the inexorable terror of *Chainsaw*'s exquisite corpse had, *and has still*, the same skull-splintering impact as the horrendously holocaustic hammerblows of its burly Gunnar Hansen-portrayed überbutcher, the loathsome homicide-lusting lord of the charnel house, Leatherface. From the John Laroquette-narrated "true crime" introduction to the unforgettable final tableau of Leatherface's macabre dance against the rising Texas sun, it is a death-train of mutilation hurtling deep down into the utter depths of human darkness. Not many things can be called godly, but is there *any* denying that *Chainsaw* is one of them?

So join me then, won't you, Creepy Reader, on my journey through the extricated entrails of that celluloid ode to human butchery and cannibalism, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*!

* * *

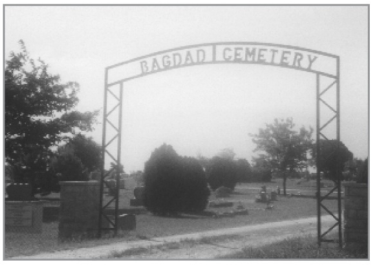
When my unspeakable wife and yours cruelly walked out of the air-conditioned confines of the Austin airport that weekday mourning and felt the dry heat already creeping across our tender flesh, we *knew* that we were in Texas. While it was thankfully devoid of the choking miasma of humidity that makes New Jersey summers so abominable, this simmering Texas clime let us know what it must feel like to be a raw slab of beef broiling within the guts of an oven—and summer had only just begun to work up a sweat. But, fearless explorers of the nethermost reaches of the macabre that we are, we let the June heat set the deliriously surreal atmosphere for our expedition through *Chainsaw*'s one-time sinematic abattoirs.

We gruesome twosome knew this carrion chainsaw-consecrated cruelty-campaign down the monstrous slavering maw of one of horrordom's most ravenous atrocities would be the proverbial be-all of our wealth of horrid journeys when we espied a freshly exterminated armadillo painting the side of the scorching Texas blacktop, its expelled viscera a deliciously putrescent shade of purple, which was a weirdly familiar sight as it was this same species of flattened Texas varmint that filled the screen seconds before the introduction of

Chainsaw’s doomed vanful of teenaged prime meat. Basking in the gangrenous, gutted glory of this fly-swarmed omen, we knew that our execrable expedition of Texas extremity-exsection had truly been blessed by the gods of Horror!

BAGDAD CEMETERY

North Bagdad Road and Route 2243
Leander
(512) 259-4855 (Bagdad Cemetery Association)

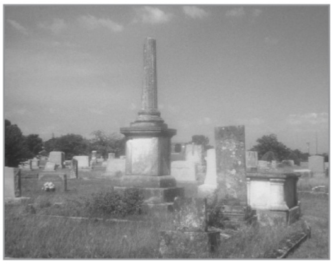


Our first savory mouthful of *Chainsaw*’s vermiculated stew was the Bagdad Cemetery in the Austin suburb of Leander. We took Route 1431 out of Austin proper and west into Leander, passing the incessant succession of strip malls that seemed to have become indelible parts of Austin’s corpus, until we came to North Bagdad Road (also known as Route 278) after about 10 miles. Turning up North Bagdad Road, we drove by an endless acreage of town house communities, the suburban sprawl made molded flesh.

It was at the very top of this sedate residential way that we came upon

Bagdad Cemetery. It was *here*, at this wholly modest and well-kept boneyard dating back to 1857, nearly 30 years before Leander itself was incorporated, that Edwin Neal's deranged Hitchhiker performed his perverse graveside disservice, turning the exhumed bodies of the dead into the bizarre corpse-art witnessed in *Chainsaw*'s flash bulb-lit establishing shot.

Rounding the corner onto Broade Street (Route 2243), we motored slowly past the chainlink fence of the cemetery and then through the main entrance with its arching Bagdad Cemetery gate and posted historical marker (the graveyard is on Texas's registry of historic places). We rolled down the dirt drive, coming around the dusty caretaker's shack, and then there it was! Although missing the carneous accoutrements with which they had been hung in *Chainsaw*'s grisly opening, it was not difficult to recognize the truncated column-topped gravemarker and casket-like above-ground tomb that had been the site of the Hitchhiker's ghastly necro-erotic artistry.



As we approached them through the arid stretches of the graveyard, our ears were met not by the noise of Austin's city limits but rather by the dull scraping of the gardening tools of the caretakers toiling harmoniously a few yards away. Covered in a skin of lichen, their common plot surrounded by a short stone wall, the funeral monuments, slumbering in the older, eastern portion of the cemetery, seemed like a place fitting not the desecration that Hooper and company had visited upon them in 1973 but, rather, a decoration of flags and flowers, as the rest of the Bagdad Cemetery was. As we breathed in the solitude of the place, we pondered exactly how *Chainsaw*'s makers had been able to film such a ghoulish scene like *that* in a place like *this*.

After taking a few photos before these two monuments to grave-robbing, we decided to take our leave of the *Bagdad Cemetery*. Because we thought an actual recreation of the Hitchhiker's cadaverous ministrations in the name of gore might disturb the serenity of such a peaceful locale, we settled for a little morsel of its gritty charnel earth for the old curio cabinet back at the Krypt; however, because the soil was so very sun-baked, it was difficult to dig up even a meager sample without the proper implements. But my morbid bride, experienced as she is in the weird sciences, wet the parched earth with some water so as to expedite the memento-pillaging. Creepy Reader, what would a ghoul like me ever do without her?

RYAN'S HILLS PRAIRIE GROCERY

1073 Highway 304
Bastrop
(512) 321-2049

RYAN'S
HILLS PRAIRIE GROCERY

Bidding farewell to the despoiled haunts of the Bagdad Cemetery, we followed the very same journey unto a doom of dismemberment taken by that van-load of human steaks and so made our way east. Traveling in our rented meatwagon, we took the fireworks-stand-riddled Highway 71 for several miles, leaving the urban (and even suburban) wards of Austin behind for the more rural countryside of Bastrop County. Taking Highway 304 towards Gonzales, we found the roadside gas station where Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns, whose skin-tight hip-hugger bell bottoms still bring a tear to the eye) and her day-tripping companions stopped after their shocking introduction to *Chainsaw*'s cannibalistic clan in the form of the photo-taking, straight-razor-wielding Hitchhiker: Ryan's Hills Prairie Grocery.

A few miles down the left side of 304, the little market looked as if not a *day* had passed since it became a blood bedewed denizen of the black annals of horror after its prominent role in *Chainsaw* all those years ago. It was all still there: the rusted corrugated tin roof, the drooping porch awning, the wooden white walls with their peeling paint, and, ghoulest of all, the decades-old gas pumps that were just as dry as they were on that ill-fated summer afternoon when Sally and her chainsaw-fodder cohorts rolled up this same dusty drive. The *only* thing that could have made our visitation *more* nostalgic would have been the heady odour of thick cuts of succulently sauced human flesh being lovingly barbecued within.

After some photos of the time-damning exterior of this one-time human butcher shoppe, we two gore-mets stepped inside for a closer look at the place's shadow-drenched belly, where Jim Siedow's Cook dished out his gastronomic blights. The insides of the Cook's man-beef bistro were actually much larger and more modern than I had thought they would be. I must say, though, that I did not recognize any of the market's interior space from *Chainsaw*, Cook's specious rescue of the hysterical Sally to be specific; however, upon seeing an Employees Only sign on a door to the side, I supposed that it was in whatever room that lay behind this unassuming door where this expectations-confounding interior scene had transpired.

As my unspeakable wife and I wandered about the small offering of aisles, devouring every inch of the small market with our sanguinivorous eyes under the pretense of shopping, I truly wondered how many patrons who frequent Ryan's Hills know the role it played in the tribute to homicidal carnivorosity that is *The Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre? Perhaps if they did they would rethink buying those salty strips of smoked meat.

Although I looked about for a rottisserie upon which some *sweet* young thing's torso was a-basting, I found only row upon row of the foodstuff found in any local convenience store. For while there was indeed much food to be found within, from soda and chips to more substantial fare like sandwiches and fried chicken, alas, there were *no* carneous victuals to sate the cannibal thirst I am sad to say, Creepy Reader. I thought of asking the teenaged girl behind the counter where yours cruelly could gorge upon a murderous delicacy such as this but decided to buy an iced tea instead.

300 QUICK HILL

Quick Hill Road & Route 1325
Rocky Point

Departing from Ryan's Hills, that former recessed rustic locale of the Cook's charnel house brasserie, we headed back to Austin for the next course of our bloodily blightful buffet of *Chainsaw*'s still-rotting remnants. As I had heard before we left on our excursion of ephemera exhumation, the Texas capital did not at all conform to the Wild West stereotype that northerners such as myself unfortunately hold of the Longhorn State. It was indeed a rather progressive town, offering an array of vegetarian eateries, organic food co-ops, little arty boutiques, and sundry “hip” establishments along Sixth Street, Austin’s answer to Bourbon Street, and “The Drag” (Guadalupe Street). And driving about the hustle and bustle of the highways and byways that wormed through it, it was clearly evident that Austin was burgeoning, truly a city on the rise.

The telltale signs of this growth were everywhere. From the numerous sites of massive road construction meant to contend with a dilated flow of motoring commuters to the many indistinguishable housing communities that were in the midst of taking root, such a surge of development would be indeed difficult to miss. However, this prevalent commercialization of the city’s identity and spirit seemed, to yours cruelly, to be not the least bit dubious.

As we drove through Austin and its surrounding burbs, we were treated to a tediously middle-class backdrop of strip malls, fast-food charnel pits, office complexes, and the unremarkable like. While there *was* a very distinctive flavor that rose out from beneath this truly expansive caul of “progress,” it seemed sadly to be the exception rather than the rule. And nowhere was this unfortunate 301 happening more apparent than with our third taste of the rotten repast of *Chainsaw*’s extant locales: Quick Hill.

LA FRONTERA

Having returned to Austin from Bastrop, we took Inter-state 35 to Route 1325 West, and it was here that we were introduced to La Frontera, a mammoth development project that would, when all is said and done, consist of not only corporate complexes and housing units but, yes, for what would this world be without them, *strip malls*.

When we came down 1325, La Frontera was *everywhere*, roadside signs heralding its arrival like the coming of some sort of manna for the ailments of the unbrainwashed, unprocessed, and uncommercialized masses. And it was here, amidst all of this rising corporate indoctrination, that we found Quick Hill. But, Creepy Reader, you may be asking yourself, what part did this slowly devoured locale play in *Chainsaw*'s nightmarish descent into depravity? Well, the wooded ridge on the outskirts of Austin that is known as Quick Hill was the home of *Chainsaw*'s family slaughterhouse.

Exiting off 1325 and onto Quick Hill Road (also known as Route 172), it sat slumbering to our right. Or at least what was left of it did, as most of the hill had been utterly gutted to make way for more highway lanes, an enormous barren chasm marking the site of what will be State Highway 45. As we came around Quick Hill on 172, we did not see what remained of its northern face until we had already passed it, so we parked our borrowed touring hearse along the shoulder of the road for a closer examination.

Rather oddly, the wasted beginnings of Quick Hill resided at the entrance to what looked like the very heart of the La Frontera properties. It was also at this same spot that we had the opportunity to look out upon Old Country Road, which cut a path through the brush and trees that still covered Quick Hill. Gated off, the extinct roadway looked like it hadn't been used in years, at least not by the public; its surface worn away by years of wear and neglect and hard to distinguish from the stony soil that lay all about the gate. Despite its decrepit state, we knew that this was the *place*! Up this same aged road, hidden in the woods to the left atop Quick Hill, had been the mysterious house where those witless Texas teens would find nothing but menace and mutilation at the malevolent hands of Leatherface and his freakish family of flesh-eaters.

The driveway to the actual house used in *Chainsaw* had led out to Old Country Road, and it was along this gravelly path that a handful of the flick's truly most violently vile scenes had been filmed, such as Leatherface's chainsaw-stifling of the ever-whining Franklin (Paul Partain) and Cook's silhouetted caning of the disobedient Hitchhiker. However, it was not until the film's final moments, with Sally's escape from the family madhouse, that Old Country Road and the house's driveway were most prominently featured.

When the gruesome twosome of Hitchhiker and Leatherface are chasing the terror-maddened Sally, it is first the driveway and then Old Country Road that she flees down; the latter can be best seen, from a northern perspective atop Quick Hill down towards where we now stood, when the pick-up truck driver aids her escape from out of the very mouth of madness. And it was also along Old Country Road that Leatherface later performed his lumbering, chainsaw-accented two-step before the ruddy backdrop of the red Texas dawn.

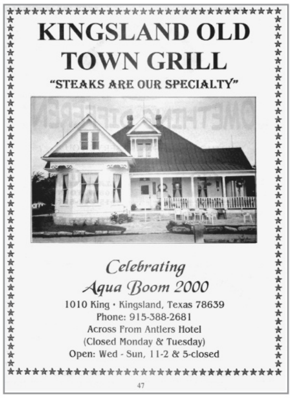
Alas, Creepy Reader, I had read the accounts and seen the photos of horror aficionados such as we who had made a similar pilgrimage to the altar of *Chainsaw* during which they had not only traversed Old Country Road, but had drooled upon both the driveway and the lot upon which the house had once festered. But because of the massive construction that was occurring just past the horizon of Quick Hill, we doubted if *any* of it still remained.

While we would indeed liked to have ventured up Quick Hill, as these others had before its dissection, to see if either the driveway to or the foundation of the family abattoir still remained, we thought it prudent *not* to test the validity of the stereotype of the severe bite of Texas justice by ignoring the No Trespassing signage that was posted all about the fences surrounding Quick Hill.

So it was from behind that gated fence at the toothless mouth of Old Country Road that we two gorehounds stood in devotion to the gruesome and grisly glory of what once was. It was oddly coincidental that we were standing there of all places, at this violence-tainted vestige of a bygone era, being erased by the encroachments of modernity, to pay tribute to the familial slaughterhouse of a cruelly carnivorous clan of Texas cannibals who were throwbacks themselves to an earlier age, isolated in their primitive brutality.

However, unlike Leatherface and his man-eating kith and kin, who hacked up for barbecue all who would trespass upon their den of mortal devourment and threaten their repugnant way of life, Quick Hill had no such antipersonnel capabilities, sadly defenseless in the path of progress. And so with it goes one of the *true* grue-adorned landmarks of American Horror.

1010 King Court
Kingsland
(325) 388-2681



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But what of the house itself, Creepy Reader? Well, before we had departed for our necro-philous campaign through *Chainsaw*'s rank bowels, I had learned that the actual house, that anonymous backwoods abattoir drenched in the carneous cacophony of howling chainsaws and human screams, had been moved to the vacation town of Kingsland some years ago now. And so we left behind the slowly decomposing body of Quick Hill for an extant artifact from the heinously homovorous *Chainsaw* horrorshow.

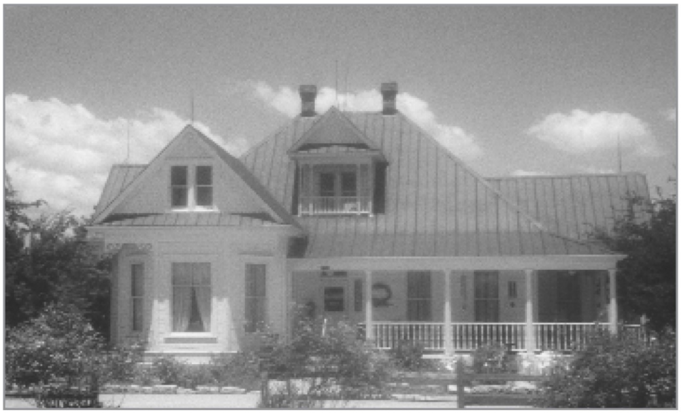
Far out on Route 1431, Kingsland was about 60 or 70 miles west of Austin, past some rather remote, mountainous and cattle-crossed stretches. But once we made it to Kingsland, it was truly a bizarre feeling to be in such a picturesque locale as this only to feed upon a one-time human slaughterhouse!

A serene retirement community as well as a seemingly popular vacation spot due to its adjacency to Lake LBJ, it seemed like the ideal spot to live out your twilight years rather than one to ruminate upon the mass celluloid mutilation of that so-called mortal coil. But indeed here it was, the *Chainsaw* house living out its own well-earned retirement after years of neglect during its inhabitance upon that now-highway-bound Quick Hill plot.

After *Chainsaw* was filmed there in 1973 and released the following year, the house apparently became a rather popular debauchery spot for Austin teenagers and thus suffered the abuse of various acts of drink-and-drug-induced vandalism. However, like the bruised and battered Sally at the end of the film, the late-nineteenth-century domicile received its own salvation in 1998 at the hands of Cheryl Brooks and her mother Noreta Genton, who bought the dilapidated dwelling and arranged its transport to Kingsland. After it was separated into seven pieces, it was moved, piece by piece over the course of five days, the same 70 or so miles that we had just traveled to the very location it now occupies along 1431 on the property of the The Antlers Inn on King Street.

KINGSLAND
OLD TOWN
GRILL
LUNCH 11 AM - 2 PM
DINNER 5 PM - 10 PM
CLOSED
MONDAY & TUESDAY

As we pulled off 1431 and into the parking lot of what is now known as the Kingsland Old Town Grill, it was difficult at first to recognize that abhorrently atrocity-aroma-ed old abattoir. However, after deeper scrutiny, despite its masterfully renovated and pristinely white-painted façade, despite its porch full of cutesy, grandmotherly knick-knacks, and despite its flower-bed-bordered chlorophyllous lawn, the sanguinivorous spirit of that shuddersomest viscera-spattered abode of Texas anthropophagi began to show through such a ruse of refurbishment. And then there it was!



It was with a little hesitation that yours cruelly walked up the three steps that led up the house's porch and then rapped upon its wooden door, as it was these same innocuous acts … mere moments before each of the two teenagers met their own execrably horrid hungry ends, the former by a savagely swung sledgehammer and the short-shorts-wearing latter upon torturous curve of a meathook.

But, deepest of red purveyor of the putrefacted that you know me to be, enter I did and it was as if I had stepped into the pages of my mother's old Lillian Vernon catalogs! The house's staircase, its banister wrapped in a glittering red-white-and-blue garland and its ascent populated with a few smiling animal welcomers, had been where Sally had fled the squealing wrath of Leatherface, scampering up these now-finely polished steps, only to later leap through the landing's window, and where Leatherface and the Hitchhiker had carried down their desiccated, corpse-like Grandpa (John Dugan) at the start of *Chainsaw*'s notoriously demented dinner scene.

Today, nary an inbred cannibal calls the house's second floor home sweet morgue but, instead, houses its current mother and daughter owners. And the curving main hallway beside the stairs, its white walls decorated with flowery wreaths and its ceiling hung with faux-antique brass lamps, was where the all-too-curious Kirk had shuffled down on 307 his skull-crushing date with a seizure-wracked snuffing. As I said, despite the high sheen upon the wood and the saccharine cuteness of its decor, there could be *no* mistaking the *Chainsaw* house for just *any* ordinary homey restaurant!

After this initial examination, we were seated by the Flo-like waitress in the right-side dining room, this entire wing of the structure never used in the film because it was occupied by the home's then-owners during the duration of the shoot. After we had ordered our lunch, the options coming not from a menu but rather the scant list read to us by our waitress, we sat there with our wide bloodshot eyes in constant motion, our hunger to be slaked not by any of the down-home grub that would soon be served to us but by the verminous traces of *Chainsaw*'s celluloid gutsfuck that had drawn us here like maggots to rot-blossoming carrion!

Creepy Reader, it was as surreal an experience as watching the film itself to sit there, surrounded by senior citizens chowing down upon the Grill's lunch special in a room whose creepiest decor was a huge cow's head with a toothpick in its mouth, discussing exactly *which* stomach-churning act of nastiness had happened *where*.

The front left dining room had been the family's living room in *Chainsaw*, its ghoulish adornments inspired by the Ed Gein school of interior design with furniture accented with and entirely fashioned from bones, skulls, and leather-made flaps of human skin, upon whose feather-strewn floor Pam had fallen just before her date with a meathook, perhaps the film's *most* violent scene, in what continues on today at the back of the house as the Grill's kitchen. The middle dining room behind it had been the family’s own, where the bound and gagged Sally was made the terrified dinner guest at the disgusting banquet table of Horror-history's most hallowedly hideous horde of human-eaters.

This is *Chainsaw*’s *most* notoriously disturbing and horrific scene, made even more so by by the all-too-real story behind its filming. Picture it, Creepy Reader: this very dining room, mere feet from where we sat that afternoon, its closed windows covered in black cloth to create the illusion of perpetual night-darkness, its stagnant, heat-choked air thick with the rank pungency of not only the formaldehyde-treated head cheese, sausage, and and other still-spoiling carneous shite spread out upon the long table as the family’s supper (or at least its putrefying first course!) but also the actors’ very own overworked sweat glands, most odiously so those of Gunnar Hansen, who, according to rumors, had only *one* suit to wear throughout the entire production! Taking some *26* hours to complete in the smothering heat of the Texas summer, this scene utterly *reeks* of the disquieting terror and disturbing torture that made *Chainsaw* such an archetypal study of the darkest foetid depths of human degradation and inhumane depravity. And no one, Creepy Reader, who has ever witnessed Hooper’s film can forget it!

After our lunch, yours cruelly rose from the table to use the head and walked down that main hallway. As I got to the end and the doorway that led out into the corridor beyond, I must admit, Creepy Reader, that I looked about rather cautiously before stepping through it as it was at this one-time animal-skull-adorned entrance that Leatherface was unleashed upon the unsuspecting underworld of Horror, his tyrannous reign of terror heralded by the horridly holocaustic hammerings of his sledge and the sinister clanging slam of that steel slaughterhouse door.

Upon my return, we gruesome twosome took a few crime scene photos of the still-dripping insides of this former anthrophagous chophouse and then happily paid our bill, money well spent not so much for the home-cooked chow but, of corpse, the chance to sup within the walls of the house which made chainsaws and cannibalism sordid staples of the horror genre.

And as we stepped out upon that porch again, where the only teeth you will find these days being those fallen out of the mouth of some octogenarian after a gut-busting meal of chicken-fried-what-have-you, and looked out over the Kingsland Old Town Grill's picturesque digs, we two gleeful gore-mands of all that is ghastly thanked the horror gods below for the opportunity to visit a locale such as *this*, so deeply buried in the abominable grue-glutted annals of the macabre, a place known to ravening Horror-fiends the world over as the atrocious altar of unadulterated anthropophagy, that witnessed the shuddersome phantasma-gore-ic orgy of utter sickness that is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

* * *

And so, if you should perchance find yourself lurking through Austin and have an insatiable hankering for a truly foul taste of the mad and macabre, then you would do well to grab a shovel and exhume some of these same Texas locales forever besmeared in the blackest of blood by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. You will *not* be disappointed! And, don't forget, Creepy Reader, if you should see a disheveled and drooling hitchhiker shambling down the side of the road ranting and raving to himself out under the blistering Texas sun, let him rot with the dead armadillos!